

FREE-THINKING

IN

MATTERS

OF

OF

RELIGION

Stated and Recommended,

By a Church of England: Divine.



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TO THE
READER.

THE Way in which I have chosen to handle my present Subject, makes it necessary for me to touch upon many Particulars: And the Compass of such a Discourse, as this, which was formed for the Pulpit, will not allow me to do more than touch upon them. I desire the Reader therefore to consider, that my Design is no more, but only to put him upon a Rational Method of thinking freely of Matters of Religion: And for fuller Information, to refer him to some of those excellent Books, which largely handle the several Points that I have had only Occasion to mention.



LUKE XII. 57.

*Yea, and why even of your selves, judge
ye not what is right?*

THAT the many Miracles which our blessed Saviour wrought, most of them openly, and in the Sight of the People, and the rest of them sufficiently attested by faithful Witnesses; the many Prophecies and Predictions that were fulfilled in his Person, and the great Holiness, as well as Reasonableness of his Doctrine, were an ample Proof of his Mission from God; and that he was that *Messias* whom God had promised, and the *Jews* at that very Time expected, has often, I think, been proved beyond any reasonable Exception: But such were the Prejudices which the Generality of the Jewish Nation had imbibed with relation to this Matter, that many of them continued obstinate in their Infidelity; many of them were in doubt what to conclude about it, and but few of them, for a long Time, were brought to believe, what to an impartial Man would soon have appeared to have been most credible.

AT the fifty fourth Verse of this Chapter, our Saviour expostulates with them for their Want of Belief, and at the same Time upbraids them with their great Partiality; for that in other Cases, where they had not so good Evidence, they were able to form proper Conclusions; and yet were most notoriously wanting to do the same in this, which was of the greatest Importance to them: Of which, according

According to his usual Custom, he gives a familiar Instance in that Judgment, which from their frequent Experience they used to make of the Weather: *When ye see a Cloud (says he) rise out of the West, straightway ye say there cometh a Shower; and so it is. And when ye see the South Wind blow, ye say there will be Heat; and it cometh to pass. Ye Hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the Sky, and of the Earth; but how is it that ye do not discern this Time?* And then he, for that Time, dismisses this Subject, with the warm Expostulation contained in the Words of my Text, *Tea, and why even of your selves, judge ye not what is right?*

A MAN is then said of himself to judge of a Thing, when his Judgment of it is no way byassed, or influenced, but by the native Evidence either of the Thing it self, or of such Proofs or Arguments as are brought for it: This is what we mean, or at least pretend to mean by *thinking freely*; and to this true *Freedom of Thought* it is that our blessed Saviour in my Text appeals. When Men pass their Judgment upon any Matter, where there is no Pleasure or Profit, Pride or Party, or any Thing to engage their *Affections*, they commonly do it with Freedom and Impartiality; neither endeavouring to put any false Gloss upon the Subject they discourse of, nor regarding such Glosses, if put upon it by others. And after the same Manner our Lord would have the People to judge of himself, his Mission and Doctrine: *Judge not according to the appearance (says he) but judge righteous Judgment, Joh. vii. 24. And why even of your selves, judge ye not what is right?* in the Words of my Text. From whence, I think; I may well lay down this Proposition

sition as the Subject of my following Discourse; that *Freedom of Thought or Judgment, truly such, is the most sure and certain Way to Truth in Matters of Religion. Yea, and why even of your selves, &c.*

IN order to the most plain and useful Proof of this important Proposition, it will be proper that I a little clear my Way to it, by justly stating the true Notion of this same *Freedom of Thought or Judgment, or Free-thinking*, as it is now most usually called; which will also be somewhat the more necessary, on the account that there are some Persons who lay the *loudest*, though not the *strongest* Claim to this Qualification; and yet, upon a strict Examination of the Matter, will be found to be very far from it.

A THING is then truly said to be *free*, when there is no manner of Clog upon it, or Impediment in its Way, whereby it is diverted, retarded, or hindered in the Performance of any Action that is proper to it. The Wind is *free*, because it *bloweth where it listeth*; the Water that runneth in a direct and open Chanel to the Place whither it tends, is so far *free*; the Will that is left to its full Liberty of Choice, is a *free Will*; and it being the proper Action of *Thought*, fully to its Power to contemplate such Objects as are proposed to it; he that does this, without any manner of Prejudice or Prepossession, whereby the Stream of his Thoughts may be either diverted, retarded or hindered, according to the Definition of *Freedom* which I have laid down, may truly be said to be a *Free-Thinker*.

OR to speak a little more plainly; the whole Work or Business of *Thought* (about whatever it is
or

or may be employed) consisting in these four Things. First, To form a clear and right Notion of each Object, which at any time is brought under Consideration. Secondly, As these Notions, by the Evidence of their own Light, stand connected together, or divided from each other, accordingly from them to frame such Propositions, as of themselves, appear to be true, without any other Proof; which we commonly call Axioms, or First Principles. Thirdly, From these same Axioms or First Principles, to draw just Consequences, in a longer or shorter Train, as there shall be Occasion. And Fourthly, to place all this in the most clear and distinct Order that may be; to the Intent that all Confusion and Misapprehension may be avoided. This, I say, being the whole Work or Business of *Thought*: If a Man shall entertain no Prejudice or Prepossession in his Mind, whereby his Notions of Things may be rendered improper or confused, his first Principles false or uncertain, his Consequences loose, or ill connected, or his Method perplexed or obscure; such a Man as this may truly be said to *judge* or *think freely*, or to maintain that *Liberty of Thought* or *Judgment*, which our bountiful Creator has made the Privilege or Prerogative of every rational Creature.

FROM this plain Account which I have endeavoured to give of what it is to *think freely*, we may draw four Corollaries, which, if I mistake not, will yet farther illustrate what I have already said.

THE first is, that he who pretends to employ his Thoughts about any Thing, if he does not give good Attention to what he is doing, cannot truly be said to be a *Free-Thinker*. Indeed it is hard to
say,

say that such a Man *thinks* at all, but rather that he *dreams* of the Subject he is upon; nor is it possible, while his Attention is thus slackened, but that other Notions will thrust themselves into his Mind, and thereby hinder or divert the Course of his Thoughts from directly pursuing what perhaps he at first might have aimed at. If *free thinking* consisted in rambling from one Thing to another, and never coming to a well-weighed and determinate Conclusion in any thing, such Men as these would be the *most Free-Thinkers* that could be. But if *Freedom of Thought* consists in nothing else but full Liberty to form and pursue our Notions of Things in the best Manner we are able; a Man who does not assert and maintain himself in this *Liberty*, but really quits and gives it up by a negligent Want of Attention, has no manner of ground to lay Claim to so honourable a Title. And he, who in the Midst of a Race should stop or turn aside to gaze at every Thing that came in his Way, might as well call himself a *Free-Runner*, as he who quits his Attention to an Argument, before he comes to the best Conclusion that can be gathered from it, may term himself a *Free-Thinker*.

My second Corollary is, that no *Sceptick*, while he continues to be such, can possibly be a *Free-Thinker*. It is not my Business at present to enquire into the Opinions of the ancient *Scepticks*: But by a *Sceptick*, I mean one who professes to doubt of every Thing, and to come to a Conclusion in nothing; which is a Whimsy that some Men have taken up as to *Religion*, though no Man was ever yet so mad as to be guided by it in the Management of his private Affairs, or those that relate to the Civil

Civil Community. There is no Dispute of it, but that in almost all the Arguments which we handle, Doubts and Difficulties do sometimes arise; but then a wise Man asserts his *Liberty* of doing his Endeavour to overcome and clear them up; and very often he does it, to the Satisfaction both of himself and others. But a *Sceptick* (in my Sense of the Word) puts Fetters and Shackles upon his own Thoughts; it being his profess'd Principle, that to clear up a Doubt is a Thing impossible, and therefore that it is in vain to attempt it. If in their private Affairs, or those of the Publick, they should always act by this Principle, they would certainly be accounted Madmen: And what would be downright *Madness* in the Business of this World, ought not surely to be look'd upon as *Free-thinking* in that of Religion.

My third Corollary is, that he who ascribes more to the Authority of any Person than what justly belongs to him, cannot be a *Free-Thinker* in any Matter, wherein that same Authority is interposed. If it could be proved beyond Exception, that God (whose Authority is supreme and absolute) had made any Man, or Number of Men, infallible in their Determinations; and, at the same time, I were sufficiently assured of the Meaning of what such Man or Men had determined, it would not be contrary to the Rules of *Free-thinking* for me to give my Assent thereunto. But if I take it for an undoubted Truth, that any Man or Men are infallible, who in Reality are not so, and the Authority of their supposed Infallibility is interposed with me, where it ought to have no Weight, and would have none, if it were not for my Error about it; it is manifest that this
Mistake

Mistake of mine must, in a very great Measure, if not altogether, *hinder* me from duly adverting to the Force of those Arguments, by which alone the Cause ought in Truth to be determined. And for this Reason, it is never to be expected that the Members of the Church of *Rome* should be brought to *think freely* in those Controversies which we have with them, as long as they are possessed with an Opinion of the Infallibility of the Pope, or Council of *Trent*, or any other, whereby their Errors have been established. This Corollary might also be applied to others, who ascribe more Authority to Councils and Synods, regularly assembled, than what they are able to prove, either by sound Reason, or by the Holy Scriptures, to belong unto them, although they do not maintain their Infallibility: But such a Digression would carry me too far out of my Way.

My fourth and last Corollary is, that as long as a Man is under the Influence of his Lusts and Passions, he cannot be a *Free-Thinker* in Matters of Religion. From what I have but now said, it appears that he who is under a strong Byass or Prepossession in favour of one side of a Question rather than the other, cannot *think freely*, or hold the Scales even, upon that same Question. Now the Question is, whether Religion be a real Truth, or only a Fiction; if the latter, then the Whoremonger, the Adulterer, the Glutton, the Drunkard, the Revengeful, the Ambitious, the Covetous, and every other wicked Man, may be well assured that there is no such Thing as Punishment abiding for them after this Life. But if Religion be a real and well grounded Truth, then there assuredly is a cer-

tain fearful looking for of Judgment and fiery Indignation which shall devour such Adversaries to it as these, if they wilfully continue in their evil Courses. Now let us suppose a Man (as I fear it is the Case of many) to be so far under the Dominion of his corrupt Inclination, as to resolve not to curb or restrain them, in case he can but be set free from the dreadful Apprehension of that eternal Punishment with which Religion threatens him. Will such a Man as this be *impartial* in weighing the substantial Arguments that are brought for Religion, with the poor Sophisms that are urged against it? Will he fully and *freely think* of what is said on each Side, and take nothing for granted, but what is either sufficiently evident by its own Light, or clearly proved by Consequence from something that is so? Alas! Every Day's Experience assures us of the contrary, and that it is in vain for Religion to expect such candid Dealing from those who have thus lifted themselves under the Banner of the Devil, the World and the Flesh against it. When such Men hear their wicked Companions, without much Scruple, asserting that all Religion is nothing but Priestcraft, or a Politick Device of Statesmen to keep the World in awe, that the orderly, beautiful and useful Frame of this visible World, is not the Effect of any Contrivance or Design, but only of blind *Chance*, or unthinking *Nature*; that the Apostles and Disciples of *Christ* imposed a Company of Lies and Legends upon the World, and were so conceited and proud to be Authors and Ringleaders of a Sect, as to expose themselves to all Manner of Torments, and Death itself, upon that only Account; with many other horrid Things not fit to be named. They se-

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cretely wish that all this were true, to the Intent that they might have nothing to disturb or controul them in their Licentiousness; and their great Desire to have it true, makes them almost persuade themselves that it is so. But if a Man shall at any time attempt to set true Religion in a clear Light before them, and thereupon to *reason* with them of *Righteousness, Temperance, and Judgment to come*; Like the Governour *Felix*, they grow impatient of such Discourse, and desire to hear no more of it. This is the Temper and Disposition of those who give themselves up to the Conduct of their Lusts and Passions: For which Reason it is most evident, that while they so continue, they neither are nor can be *Free-Thinkers* in any Thing where *Religion* is concerned, notwithstanding that many of them are the greatest Pretenders to it.

Having thus endeavoured clearly to state the true Notion of a *Free-Thinker*, and to distinguish him from all false Pretenders to that Name, I proceed now to the Proof of the Proposition which I have laid down, that *Freedom of Thought or Judgment, truly such, is the most sure and certain Way to Truth, in Matters of Religion.*

IF I were to prove to any Man, that the best and surest Method he could take to find the Way to the Place whither he intended to go, would be to walk by the Light of the Sun; no doubt but I might very well *reason* with him upon the Subject. I might tell him that this was one great End for which God, who made him, had given him Sight, that he might discover Danger while there might be Time to avoid; and that if he should obstinately refuse, or carelessly neglect to make Use of that Faculty, with

which his Creator had endowed him (most certainly for some good Purpose or other) and should thereby fall down a Precipice, or into the Sea, he would be the Author of his own Destruction: Or if, to prevent this, he should tell me that he had committed himself to the Conduct of a skilful and faithful Guide, I should acknowledge indeed that if he were *blind*, there would be a Necessity upon him to have Recourse to this Method. But having the same Sort of Eyes that other Men have, if he would but make the due Use of them, he might be as capable of finding his Way as any other Man; neither would it require any great Skill, but only a little Attention and Enquiry, to distinguish between the plain Road, and Rocks, and Mountains, or deep Waters: Nor could it be imagined that any other Man would be more *faithful* to him than he, if he were sober, would be to himself. And since all Men generally have some private Designs of their own to carry on, it might be possible that the Man who should undertake to guide him, instead of conducting him in the right Way, might betray him to Thieves and Robbers, where he would be despoiled of his Substance, and be in Danger even of his Life. After this Manner, I say, I might very well reason with the Person of whom I am now speaking. But instead of all this Speculation, which possibly might give Occasion for much Disputation and Cavil, I would *persuade* him, if I could, to open his Eyes, and make the proper use of them, in concurrence with any other Helps, which his own Discretion might prompt him to, for the finding of his Way. Nor should I in the least doubt, but that if he would sincerely and candidly follow my Advice,

vice, his own Experience would, in a little Time, fully convince him that I had put him upon a right Method.

Now just after the same Manner, I should endeavour to convince a Man, that the surest Method he can take to find the Way to Heaven, is to make the same Use of his Understanding about it, as a Traveller ought to do of his Eyes, in finding the Road from one Place to another. Instead of entering into a long Disputation with him about the Rule of Faith, the Necessity of a living infallible Judge or Guide in Matters of Religion, the Authority of the Church, the Pope, or Council, or the true Method of interpreting the Holy Scripture (all which has been perplexed with so much Sophistry, as may probably puzzle and confound a Man of an ordinary Capacity) I should advise him to *think freely* and impartially of *Religion*, in the same Manner as he would of any other Thing, where he has nothing but Truth in his View; to examine the Principles upon which it is grounded, and the Consequences that are drawn from them, and to admit of nothing as a Truth, but what is either sufficiently evident by its own native Light, or manifestly follows from something that is so: In a Word, I should, with *St. Paul*, advise him to *judge what I say*, (1 Cor. x. 15.) to *prove all Things* that I should offer to him, by the Test of his own sober Understanding, and then to *hold fast that which is good*, (1 Thess. v. 21.) and, with *St. John*, *not to believe every Spirit, but to try the Spirits whether they be of God*, (1 Joh. iv. 1.) And lastly with our Saviour himself, in the Passage which I have already quoted, beside the Words of my Text, *not to judge according*

according to the Appearance of Things, until he had searched them to the bottom, and then to judge *righteous Judgment*; all which, if he would do with *Diligence* and *Impartiality*, (without both which I have shewn he cannot be a *Free-Thinker*) a surer Method cannot be found, whereby to reject all Falshood, and embrace nothing but Truth in Matters of Religion. And that I may give an *experimental* Proof (which is always the most satisfactory) of what I have thus asserted, I shall endeavour, in the clearest manner, to shew, that to *think freely*, as I have but now described it, is the *surest Way to bring a Man*,

FIRST, to embrace *Natural Religion*:

SECONDLY, to own the *Truth of Christianity*:

THIRDLY, to reject the *Errors of Popery*, and consequently to be a *Protestant*: And,

FOURTHLY, Among *Protestants*, to adhere to our *Church*, as it is by *Law* established.

AND having nothing that is *new* to offer on these Subjects, but only with all the Brevity and Plainness I can to repeat some small Part of what has already been often said upon each of them, I hope I shall be able to keep my Discourse within some tolerable Compass.

FROM what I have hitherto been saying, I think it sufficiently follows, that he who readily embraces every Principle that appears to be true, and never rejects any Consequence that manifestly follows (whether mediately or immediately) from such Principles, is truly a *Free-Thinker*. If then at any time we have a mind to know whether *Free-thinking* will lead us into this or that Opinion, we have no more to do but carefully to enquire, First, upon

what Principles such Opinion is grounded; and Secondly, whether it follows from them by a certain Consequence: And if we find the Principles to be true, and the Chain of Consequences (whether short or long) to be well connected; then, and only then, a true *Free-Thinker* will embrace such an Opinion: To which I must add, that if the Principles and their Consequences appear to be so true and certain, as to include an utter Impossibility of being false, then they are to be look'd upon as strictly infallible; but where there remains a bare Possibility of Falshood, there may yet be room for a very high Degree of *Probability*, or even for such *Certainty* as may justly exclude all Doubt or Diffidence, altho' we cannot call it *Infallibility* in the strict Sense of that Word.

THUS much then being premised, my first Business is to consider what are the Principles, with their Consequences upon which *Natural Religion* is grounded; for a *large* Account of which I must refer you to some of these excellent Books that have been written upon that Subject, my present Design only requiring that I should give such a short Scheme of them, as may furnish a *Free-Thinker* with Materials to enlarge upon.

AND here what Principles can be more clear, or Consequences more certain, in a Matter of this Nature, than these that follow?

FIRST, that where no sort of *Cause* is, no *Effect* can ever be produced: From whence it undoubtedly follows, that if ever there had been a single Instant, in which nothing at all did exist, nothing could ever have been brought into Existence: The Consequence of which, even to a Demonstration, is,

is; that therefore there must be some *eternal* original Cause of all those *Effects* which have been and are every Day produced.

SECONDLY, that nothing but an *intelligent Being* is capable of *contriving* Things, and putting them in due Order to answer an *End*: The indubitable Consequence of which is, that since there manifestly appears to be so much *Contrivance*, so much Art and Design in the Structure of the Universe and the several Parts of it, and all so managed and directed as may be proper for the Conservation of the whole, and the Continuance of every Kind or Species of Things that daily perish in it: The original Cause of all Things must not only be endowed with Power to effect it, but also with Wisdom and Understanding to contrive it in the manner that now we find it; which is, in other Terms, to say, that undoubtedly there is a God who made the World; nor is there the least Indication in the whole Compass of Nature that there is any other God but one.

THIRDLY, that God having made Man a rational Creature, and thereby capable of honouring and obeying his great Creator, it is most highly reasonable to suppose, and indeed absurd not to suppose that he requires a Performance accordingly: From which Principle immediately follows all that Duty which we owe to God.

FOURTHLY, that God having made Man fit for *Society*, without which there is no such thing as Happiness or Comfort to be had upon Earth; it is most highly reasonable to suppose that he requires Men to live sociably among themselves, and thereby to promote the Happiness of each other, by doing what

what Good they can one to another, and never hurting each other, excepting that there should be some unavoidable Necessity for it; which takes in all the Duties that Men owe to each other in all their several and different Relations.

FIFTHLY, that the Creator and Lord of the Universe, having furnished Mankind with all Things necessary for their convenient and comfortable Subsistence, undoubtedly requires that we should put all these Things, which he has given us, to the proper Use for which they were manifestly designed, neither wasting or any way abusing them for the Gratification of any unruly Appetite, nor idly hoarding them up without making any use of them; and more especially whilst others may be in Danger of perishing, for want of some Part, even of our unnecessary Superfluities: From which Principle, the Duties of Sobriety, Temperance, Chastity, and Contentedness, together with the unlawfulness of the contrary Vices of Gluttony, Drunkenness, Lust and Covetousness are most plainly deduced.

AND, lastly, since God is most wise and powerful, (from whence his other Attributes also may very well be inferred) it is most reasonable to suppose, that he will not suffer his Laws, of which he has given us such plain Indications, even by the Light of Nature, to be trampled upon or despised, but will punish those who live in wilful Disobedience, and reward those who are faithful and diligent in conforming their Actions and even their Desires to them: And since, from Experience, it is plain, that these Rewards and Punishments are not, or at least not fully, distributed in this Life, that therefore it can hardly be doubted but that there is a Life to

come, wherein this Distribution shall fully and completely be made.

It would take up a Volume rather than a small Part of such a Discourse as this, to set this whole Matter in its full Light: But from the little that I have said, I think it sufficiently appears, that if a Man will but well consider these few Principles, with their Consequences, and then set himself to *think freely*, that is to say rationally and impartially upon them, he will certainly embrace *Natural Religion*, even upon a Supposition that there were no such thing as Revelation to give him any fuller or farther Information about it.

SECONDLY, as for *Christianity*, which comes next to be considered, if a Man will but *think freely*, that is to say, both diligently and impartially, he may most rationally ground his Belief of it upon the following Principles with their Consequences.

FIRST, that since both the Wisdom and Power of God are far above all that we can conceive or imagine; if once it be made appear that he has, by Revelation, made known any thing or things, to be believed or done, over and above the Doctrines and Duties of *Natural Religion*, such Thing or Things ought accordingly to be believed and done by us: Nor is it a just Objection against any thing that is so revealed, that it is altogether above the Reach of our Understanding to comprehend, or form a true Idea of it, any more than it would be a sufficient Reason for a Man who never had sight, to deny the Existence of Light and Colours, because, for want of a proper Faculty, it is impossible for him to frame a right Notion of them. No Man indeed can possibly give his Assent at the same time to
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Things, that to him appear to be contradictory each to the other; but it is no way absurd or unreasonable for any Man, upon the Testimony of those who are wiser and better informed than himself, to give Credit to such Things as are beyond the Compass of his own Understanding.

SECONDLY, That if any Man shall assert that such or such Things have been revealed by God; and for the Confirmation of what he says, shall do such Works as cannot any other way be performed, but by the extraordinary Power of God himself: The Performance of such Works, if sure and certain, is justly to be looked upon as an undoubted Proof of the Reality of such Revelation; it being not to be imagined that God should exert his Power in so extraordinary a manner, thereby to bring Men to a Belief of what is false, and therefore ought not to be believed: Nor is it a sufficient Ground for us to reject such a Revelation *so proved*, that we are not able to dive into the Reasons why God should make it, except we take upon us to be wiser even than God himself: From whence this Consequence is beyond Exception plain, that if those miraculous Things which are recorded of *Moses* in the Land of *Egypt*, at the Red Sea, and in the Wilderness; and after him of the great Men and Prophets among the People of *Israel*; and lastly of *Jesus Christ* and his Disciples, who were the first Preachers of Christianity: If the miraculous Things (I say) that are recorded of these several Persons are real Truths, and not Fables or Fictions, the Revelations, to which they gave Testimony, must needs be looked upon as coming from God himself.

THIRDLY, That when a Matter of Fact is testified by Witnesses, who are sufficiently informed about it, and cannot be supposed to have any Design to misinform others; the Testimony of such Witnesses concerning such a Matter of Fact, is to be looked upon as undoubtedly true. If therefore we will allow that the People of *Israel*, in the Days of *Moses* and after, were sufficiently informed whether or no they really saw those Wonders at which they alledged that they were present, and had no design to propagate the belief of a Lye among their own Children and Posterity: And that the Apostles and Disciples of *Christ*, who every Day conversed with him, were sufficiently informed whether or no they really saw all those Miracles which they declared they had seen, (amongst which his Resurrection from the Dead is one of the principal) and neither did, nor indeed could form a Design of making the World believe an unprofitable Lye, (for unprofitable indeed it must have been to them who got nothing but Persecution by it, if it were a Lye) How can we disbelieve, or indeed doubt of those Facts which are set down in the Holy Scriptures, and come to us testified after such a manner?

FOURTHLY, That where a Matter of Fact is firmly believed by vast Multitudes of People, very many of whom are known to be Persons of great Integrity as well as Understanding, and no way can, with the least Probability, be assigned how such a Belief should obtain, but only the real Truth of the Fact it self; in this Case we have all Reason to believe that such Fact is really true, and no Contrivance or Fiction. Here then let us briefly consider a few such

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Facts,

Facts, and observe how they concur to establish the Truth of *Christianity* beyond all reasonable Doubt or Contradiction, provided only that we *think freely* of them, and of the Consequences which fairly may be drawn from them.

THAT the Children of *Israel*, being grown into a numerous People in the Land of *Egypt*, where they had been kept in Slavery, were, under the Conduct of *Moses*, from thence delivered: That before the King of *Egypt* would give Leave for their Departure, many great and grievous Calamities had been brought upon his Country and People; that the *Israelites*, by the Guidance of a Pillar of a Cloud by Day, and of Fire by Night, got safe through the Red Sea, in which the *Egyptians*, who followed them, were drowned; that during their Abode in the Wilderness, for the Space of forty Years, they were constantly fed with Manna, (a Food never known, either before or since, or even then in any other Place) and received certain Commandments from Mount *Sinai*, which were delivered with Thunderings and Lightenings, and the Noise of a Trumpet, and the Mountain smoking in a most astonishing Manner, (to say nothing of many other Miracles that both then and afterwards were wrought among them.) And that these Commandments (first being written by God himself in Tables of Stone) together with all the rest of the Law which *Moses* had received for the People; and also a History from the Creation of the World down to that time, were, by the same *Moses*, written in a Book, and this Book lodged in an Ark called the Ark of God, with some other Memorials there also deposited, and preserved for many Generations;

rations; all this, I say, with much more to the same Purpose that might be reckoned up, if the Time would permit, has all along, to this Day, been universally believed by all the People of *Israel*, and by all Christians and others who own the Truth of the Scripture History. Now, to pass by some few Circumstances and Incidents that may be questioned, or rather cavilled at, if the *main Substance* of all these Facts, as we have them recorded, be really true; the Truth of that Revelation, which is alledged to have been made by God to *Moses*, must be beyond all Question: But if any Man shall say that this whole History is none other but a Fiction, (which is the Case of those who resolve to deny every Thing that makes for revealed Religion) it stands upon *him* to shew which way it is *possible* for such a Fiction to gain so universal a Belief as this has done: Could the *Israelites* themselves be deceived and imposed upon in all these Transactions, which in their own Sight fell out in the Land of *Egypt* and in the Wilderness? Or is it to be imagined that they should all, *to a Man*, combine together to put a Cheat upon their Posterity, and no Man be able or willing to detect the Forgery? He that denies the Truth of a History that comes to us so well attested as this is, I think, by the same Rule, may deny the Truth of all the Histories of all Ages, and of every Fact at which he himself has not been present.

After the same manner we may reckon up the Miracles which were performed by our Blessed Saviour and his Apostles, the Belief of which has, all along from those very Days, most firmly and universally obtained amongst all Christians far and near; nor do the Enemies of Christianity deny the Truth
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 honestly and fairly, and then let him speak his
 Thoughts. If *Jesus Christ*, by a bare Touch or Word
 spoken, gave Sight to the Blind, Hearing to the
 Deaf, Speech to the Dumb, and Strength, Health
 and Soundness to the Lame, the Maimed and the
 Sick of all sorts of Diseases: If he fed four or five
 thousand Men with a small Quantity of Provision
 in it self not sufficient for the hundredth Part of
 that Number: If he raised several Persons from the
 Dead, and he himself, after he had been publicly
 crucified, died upon the Cross, had a Spear thrust
 into his very Vitals, and had lain until the third
 Day in the Sepulchre, with a Guard of *Ro-*
man Soldiers upon his Body; if after all this (I say)
 he rose again to Life, conversed familiarly with his
 Disciples for forty Days upon the Earth, and then,
 in the open Sight of a Multitude of them, was taken
 up into Heaven, and from thence, by the Mission
 of the Holy Spirit, endowed his Disciples with the
 Knowledge of all Languages, and every Thing else
 that was necessary for their preaching the Gospel
 throughout the World: And if these same Disciples,
 by that Power which they received from him, per-
 formed also many miraculous Works for the Con-
 firmation of what they preached and taught; if all
 this (I say) be real Truth, what Ground can there
 be for any Man to deny or doubt of that Revela-
 tion of God's Will, which has been made known
 to the World by *Jesus Christ*, and those who were
 sent

sent by him? But if any Man shall say that it is all but a Romance, either he must acknowledge his Assertion to be altogether groundless, and therefore foolish, or else he must be able to shew how, in the Circumstances wherein Things then were, it was possible and practicable for such a firm and general Belief of these Things to obtain in the World, as we find has done. Was it possible for a Company of ignorant Fishermen, and such sort of Persons, who were the first Preachers of the Gospel, after this manner, to impose upon so wise and learned an Age as that was, in a Matter of so great Consequence? Would no Man, in those Days, make strict Inquiry into all these Things, and detect the Cheat, as they easily might have done if a Cheat it had been? Or were all the first Christians, to a Man, so fond of suffering Persecution and Death for a Company of Lyes, as that none of them would discover the Combination into which they had entered for the imposing of them upon the World? Indeed, whatever Pretence of this sort can possibly be thought of, it immediately appears to be so extravagant and monstrous, that, I think, I may with all Assurance say, that nothing more but a little clear and *Free-thinking* is requisite to bring a Man to give his full and free Assent to the Truth of Christianity.

If any Man shall tell me, that there being sundry Difficulties and Objections raised against all that I have hitherto been saying, it will be necessary to have them all effectually cleared up and answered, before a *Free-Thinker* can heartily embrace the Christian Religion; I answer,

FIRST, that some of the Objections which have been raised in Opposition to the Proofs which we bring

bring for the Truth of Christianity, are so very weak and foolish, as that barely to consider them is enough to confute them; and whenever Men lay a Stress upon very weak Pretences, it is a sure Sign that they want good Arguments to support their Cause.

For instance: If our blessed Saviour really arose from the Dead, and returned to Life, as is recorded of him, it cannot, I think, be doubted but that he truly was what he pretended to be, the promised *Messiah* and Messenger of God to the World; and consequently that that Religion which was taught by him, and by others, to whom he gave Commission, is the true Religion. Now that he was actually dead, and had a Spear thrust into his Side; and that he was laid in a Sepulchre under a Guard of Soldiers, who were commanded there to keep strict Watch, is too notorious to be gainsayed. If then he did not rise from the Dead, what became of his Body? For it is not so much as pretended that it was found in the Sepulchre upon the third Day: Why, say the *Jews*, *His Disciples came by Night and stole him away, while the Soldiers slept*; and for this we have the Testimony of the Soldiers themselves. Now if we do but a little consider this poor Pretence, we shall presently find that it comes to *mere* nothing: For has it the least Shew of Probability, that all the Soldiers, who were appointed to keep Watch upon so extraordinary an Occasion, should fall asleep at one time? Or that none of them should awake with the Noise of opening the Sepulchre, when the Disciples (as it is pretended) came to steal away the Body? Or indeed that the Disciples themselves, a Company of

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poor Men, who had not the Courage (except one of them) to fight for their Master whilst he was alive, would venture upon so hazardous and unprofitable an Attempt as to steal away his dead Body from a Guard of Soldiers? And if all the Soldiers were so fast asleep, as not to know when they came; (for if they had known of their coming, they would certainly have prevented the Execution of their Design,) how was it possible for them to know whether they came or not? Or what Credit is to be given to Witnesses, who own that they were asleep when the Thing was done about which they gave their Testimony? In a word, to vindicate the Truth of our Saviour's Resurrection from the Force of this Objection, which is the *only* one that ever was brought against it, I desire no more from any Man of common Sense, but that he will *think freely* and fully of the whole Matter.

AGAIN, amongst other Arguments that are made use of to prove the divine Authority of the *Holy Scriptures*, and consequently the Truth of Christian Religion, one is drawn from the fulfilling those Prophecies or Predictions which are contained in them. For however the Question touching some few of these Prophecies may, by the Cunning of our Adversaries, be perplexed and made intricate; yet most evident it is, that divers Things were in them foretold many Years before they came to pass; and the Event having exactly answered, is an undoubted Argument that the Prophecies themselves were dictated by the Spirit of God.

PORPHYRY, the famous Heathen Philosopher, finding himself pressed with this Argument, and particularly with some Prophecies in the Book of
Daniel,

Daniel, had no other Answer to give, but confidently to affirm that these pretended Prophecies were not written by *Daniel*, but contrived after the Events had come to pass, by some cunning Impostor, and imposed upon the World for real Prophecies. But what ground had *Porphyry* for this Opinion of his? None that we can find, save only that these Prophecies made against the Cause that he had espoused, and therefore he was resolved to reject them. But is there any Probability in the Opinion itself? Or any likelihood that such a Deceit could be put upon the People of the *Jews*, and by that Means come likewise to be imposed upon the Christian Church? So far from it, that it is notorious, that from long before the Events, whereby these Prophecies were fulfilled, the People of the *Jews* have all along to this Day been most scrupulously careful to preserve the Books which they account Holy (of which the Book of *Daniel* is one) from all manner of Corruption or Mixture. And he who denies the Book of *Daniel*, as both the *Jews* and Christians now have it, to have been written long before the fulfilling of these same Prophecies, and by the same Person whose Name it bears, may as well deny all that the World has hitherto without Doubt or Contradiction believed concerning the Books of all the Authors that have written, from the remotest Antiquity down to this present Age. Let the *Free-Thinker* impartially consider this whole Matter, and then I may leave him to judge of this Objection which some, now adays, begin to renew upon no other Authority but that of *Porphyry*. What I have now been saying, may perhaps be look'd upon as a Digression; but I

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thought it would not be improper, by an Instance or two, to shew what poor trifling Objections the Adversaries of Christianity have not blush'd to muster up to serve the Cause which they have once resolved to espouse. To return then, I answer,

SECONDLY, That all the Objections, which ever have been brought against the Truth of Christianity, have been so fully and fairly answered, as may give Satisfaction to every sober Man, who will but let himself impartially and diligently to consider the whole Matter, as appears by the many excellent Books, both ancient and modern, upon that Occasion written, to which no Reply ever has, or indeed can be given.

BUT, Thirdly, that which comes up close to the Point is this; That *where any thing is proved by such Arguments as are unanswerably conclusive, the Truth of it ought not to be denyed or disputed, on account of any Difficulty that may arise about it, of which we are not able to find out the Solution*; such Difficulties either arising from the Want of Information, or being only an Argument of the Imperfections of our Faculties and Understanding, but not of any want of Truth in the Thing itself, which is supposed to have been unanswerably proved. There are Theorems in Geometry, which are proved to a Demonstration: There are divers Things of which we are fully convinced by our own Experience, or by undoubted Testimony. And yet there remain many Difficulties about them, which all the Wit of Man has not yet been able clearly to unfold. Supposing then that there are some Difficulties about *Religion* in the general, and *Christianity* in particular, to which we are not able to give a satisfacto-

My Answer: Yet since the Truth both of the one and the other is manifestly proved by plain Consequences, drawn from such Principles as no Man in his Wits ever yet doubted of, it is no just Reason for a Man to reject them, or either of them, upon the Score of any such Difficulties as these.

HAVING thus brought the *Free-Thinker*, if he be truly such, to be a *Christian*; the next Thing to be done, is to shew that if he continues to think after the same Manner, he will undoubtedly *reject the Errors of Popery, and consequently be a Protestant*.

AND here there are three Principles, which I think I may securely offer to every Man, who resolves to make a *free* and sober Use of his own Understanding in Matters of Religion.

FIRST, that since all *Christians*, who, from the first preaching of the Gospel have in vast Multitudes been spread over the Face of the Earth, and in Process of Time have divided themselves into many Sects and Parties: That since all these (I say) have all along, from the first Ages of Christianity, down to this present Time, unanimously owned and agreed, that those Books of the *Old and New Testament*, which we call *Canonical*, are the Rule (though the Church of *Rome* will not now allow them to be the only Rule) of their Religion. The surest way that a Man, who thinks for himself, can take to find out what it is that *Christianity* prescribes to be believed or done by those who profess it, is to have Recourse to these same Books, which we commonly call by the Name of the *Holy Scriptures*, and to search them with all Diligence and Impartiality.

SECONDLY, That innumerable Copies of the *Holy Scriptures* in their original Languages, and of the
Transla-

Translations of them into almost all other Languages, having been universally dispersed and carefully preserved in all Christian Churches, from the time of their first planting (which is a notorious Matter of Fact) where all or almost all these same Copies, both of the Originals and Translations agree in the same Words, or exactly in the same Sense; there we may assure our selves, that we respectively have the very Words, and the true Sense of the *Holy Scriptures*: It being impossible that either Chance or Combination should be able to propagate *one and the same Error* throughout all or almost all that vast Multitude of Copies, which in so many several Languages have been, and are to this Day dispersed and preserved throughout the whole Christian Church; not to repeat what I have already said of the great and even scrupulous Care of the *Jews*, to this Day, in preserving the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

THIRDLY, That if any Man, or Number of Men, shall take upon himself, or themselves, so to interpret the *Holy Scriptures*, as that all others shall be obliged, under Pain of Damnation, to receive his or their Interpretations, without farther enquiring into them. It ought to be proved, beyond all reasonable Exception, that he or they have received this Authority, to which they thus lay Claim, from God himself: Or else every Man is at Liberty to reject all such Interpretations, of the Truth of which he is not, in his own Mind, otherwise convinced. And the same is to be said, in case that he or they shall take upon them to prescribe any religious Doctrines to be believed, or Duties to be practised, of which the Ho-

ly Scriptures make no manner of mention, either in exprefs Terms, or by fufficient Confequence.

UPON thefe three Principles (which in themfelves are moft highly rational) a *Free-Thinker* will proceed in his Inquiry into the Contents of the Chriftian Religion; he will fearch the *Holy Scriptures* to the beft of his Skill, (and more efpecially the four Gospels, which give an Account of the feveral Difcourfes of our Bleffed Saviour himfelf) where he will find abundance of Things fo plainly delivered, as to admit of no Controverfy about the meaning of them; and where any Paflage appears to be obfcure or doubtful, he will lay no Stress upon it, until he finds it to be fairly and reafonably cleared up: And whereas he finds the Church of *Rome* interpreting fome Paflages after a moft arbitrary manner, and contrary even to Senfe, Reafon, and Scripture, and fometimes impofing her Tenets upon us by her own bare Authority and pretended Infallibility, even upon a Suppofition that they could not be proved *from Scripture*: He refolves to have no Regard to thefe Pretences, except they were able to bring much better Proof for their Claim of Infallibility than any that yet appears, and alfo to agree among themfelves whether this fame Infallibility be lodged with the Pope fingly, or with a General Council, or both together. This is the rational Method which a *Free-thinking Chriftian* will undoubtedly take in the Choice of his particular Religion; and whither that will at length lead him, I think is no very hard Matter to foretel.

THE laft Thing which I am to fhew, is, that among the feveral Sorts of Proteftants, a *Free-Thinker* will certainly adhere to our Church, as it is by Law
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established. And this I think he will undoubtedly do, if he embraces this one most reasonable Principle.

THAT where every Thing necessary to Salvation may be fully and freely had in an *established Church* and nothing by that Church required is any way sinful, or destructive of Salvation. There, as well the Love of Peace and Unity, as the Duty of Obedience to lawful Authority in Things that are lawful, will lay every Christian under a strict Obligation to hold Communion with such Church, and upon no Account to separate from it.

THE Time of which I fear I have already taken up too much) will not allow me to enlarge upon the Consequences of this Principle; and indeed they are so plain, that there needs nothing but a little just and *Free-thinking*, fully to apprise every sober Man of them.

IN the Name of God then, and to conclude all. Let every Man *think as freely* as he pleases of Matters of Religion, provided always that he thinks honestly and sincerely, and without any Byass, either for his Lusts or Passions, or for this or that Sect or Party, or indeed for any thing but Truth itself; the more Religion is this way thought of, the more beautiful and amiable it will appear. Too many indeed there are who *love Darkness rather than Light, because their Deeds are evil. For every one that doth Evil, hateth the Light, lest his Deeds should be reprov'd. But he that doth Truth, cometh to the Light, that his Deeds may be manifest, that they are wrought in God.* Joh. iii. 19, &c.